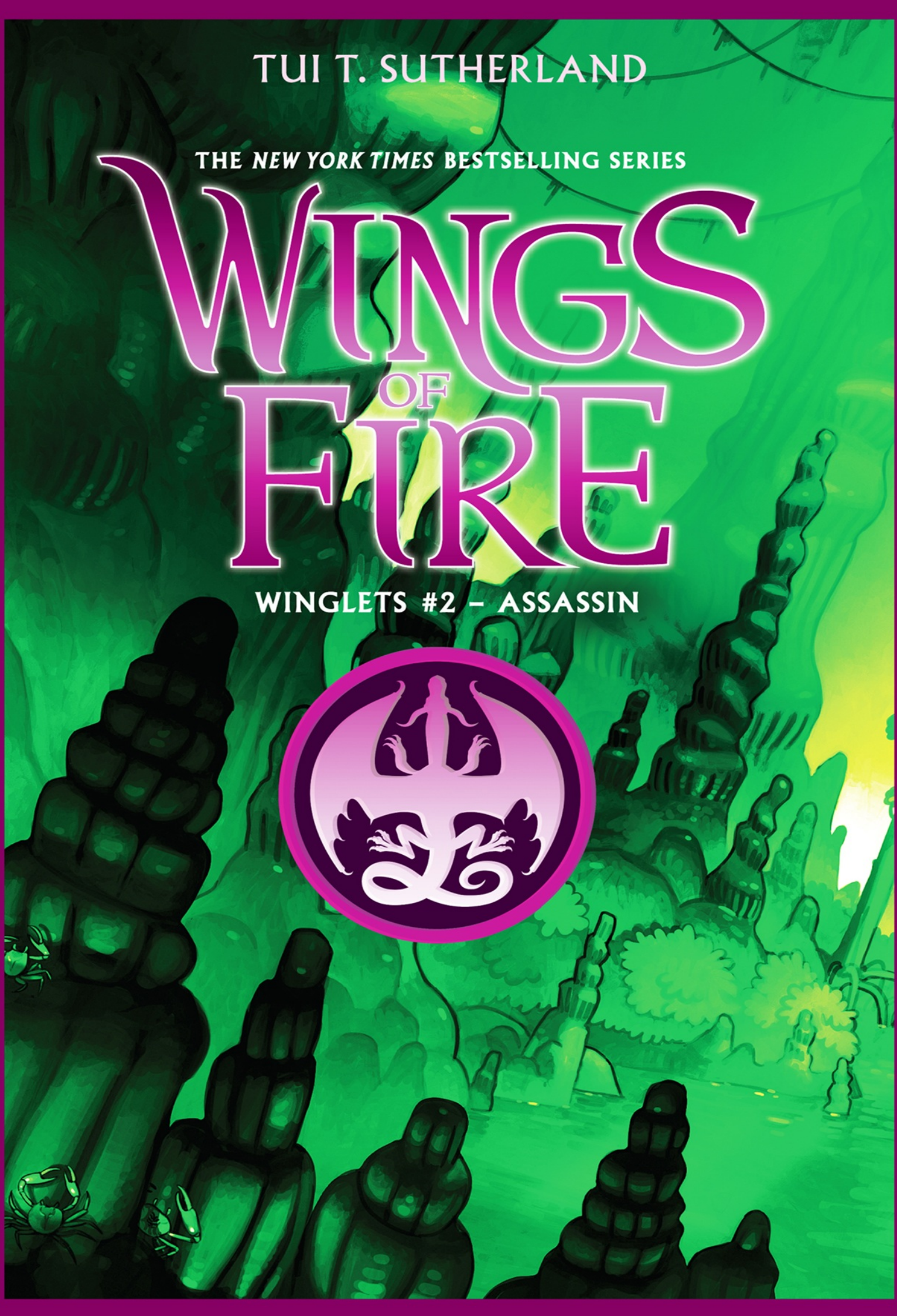
TUI T. SUTHERLAND

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING SERIES

WINGS OF FIRE

WINGLETS #2 – ASSASSIN



WINGS OF FIRE

WINGLETS #2: ASSASSIN

by

TUI T. SUTHERLAND

SCHOLASTIC PRESS
NEW YORK

CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE

ASSASSIN

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM WINGS OF FIRE BOOK EIGHT: *ESCAPING PERIL*

ALSO AVAILABLE

COPYRIGHT

Note: This story is set approximately two years before the brightest night when the prophecy dragonets hatch.

Deathbringer was a dragonet who followed orders.

Read this scroll, sweep this cave, catch that exact fish, kill that misbehaving prisoner — whatever it was, he did it, no questions asked.

(Well. He'd wanted to ask questions about the prisoner. Such as: Why did anyone bring a mud dragon to the secret night dragon home in the first place? Of course he would have to die; no one could know where they lived. And why make a four-year-old dragonet kill him? There were plenty of NightWing guards who would have been happy to take that order instead. But that was his assignment, and so of course he did it, as cleanly and quickly as he could.)

Obedience to your elders: the most important thing a young NightWing had to learn. That, plus loyalty to the tribe and how to keep a secret.

But his new assignment was a bit … confusing.

"You want me to spy on the queen?" Deathbringer tilted his head at Quickstrike, the dragon who had taught him everything he knew. "*Our* queen?"

"If she's there," Quickstrike answered. "I'll be meeting with Greatness in an hour in the council chamber, and I want you to sneak in and listen, if you can."

He wasn't quite sure how to feel about this order. It rather confused his idea of who was in charge of him.

On the other talon, Greatness wasn't really the queen; she was the queen's daughter and her mouthpiece. No one had seen Queen Battlewinner herself since she'd abruptly disappeared from public view several months before. Maybe she'd be there, hidden and listening, but maybe not.

And possibly this was a test that the queen actually knew about.

Quickstrike always had bigger reasons behind her orders, even when they seemed mysterious. Besides, what else was he going to do: disobey her? Not likely; not ever.

"Be as stealthy as you can," Quickstrike said before turning away. "And meet me afterward at your sleeping cave."

Deathbringer headed straight for the council chamber, giving himself time to avoid any guards that might be posted. The shadows swallowed him up, black against black, and he kept his wings folded to hide the glittering spray of silver scales underneath.

He slipped through one of the back tunnels into the chamber that emerged directly below the Queen's Eye, and then slithered along the wall to the closest cave. There was no way to know if the queen was there, watching from behind her stone screen, but just in case, he stayed out of her line of sight. He tucked himself into the darkest recesses, feeling jagged rock press against his back and tail.

It felt like hours before he finally heard approaching talons. But this was something he'd worked on with Quickstrike, too: staying perfectly still, no matter how much his muscles screamed.

"There had better be a point to all this," growled a deep male voice. Deathbringer wasn't sure who that was.

"You don't have to be here," a female voice snapped. That one was easy; Deathbringer had been listening to Quickstrike's voice every day since he'd hatched, after all. "Greatness, this is a matter for you, me, and the queen. Nobody else."

"Morrowseer is one of the queen's most trusted advisors, and she wants him consulted on anything that might affect the prophecy," Greatness answered. She always sounded a little nervous, as if she wasn't sure anyone would believe anything she said.

"That's right," Morrowseer said smugly. "So what are you trying to get away with now, Quickstrike?"

"Wait," Greatness said. "Let me stand by the Queen's Eye, in case Mother has anything to say." The sound of her wings flapping filled the cave, and Deathbringer pictured her flying up to perch beside the screen. "All right," she called. "Go ahead."

"You know I'm being sent to the continent," Quickstrike said, plunging

right in. “To carry out the council’s new strategy of targeted assassinations, starting with the growing threat from the Kingdom of the Sea. I’m here because I want Deathbringer to be on my team.”

It took all of Deathbringer’s concentration to keep still. He hadn’t realized this meeting was going to be about *him*.

The continent!

“No,” Morrowseer growled. “Don’t be absurd.”

“*You* don’t get to decide,” Quickstrike snapped. “The queen is still the queen, despite all your pretensions lately, Morrowseer.”

“It does go against all our rules,” Greatness said apologetically. “He’s just too young, Quickstrike. You know we never let dragonets leave the kingdom until they’re ten years old. Isn’t he only four?”

“Yes, but he’s the smartest dragonet in the tribe,” Quickstrike said. “And if we want to train him to be our next assassin, he needs to start now. He needs to know the geography of Pyrrhia and the way the seven tribes work. He needs to understand the politics of this war for the SandWing throne. He needs to learn how to slip into a tent and slice open an IceWing’s throat without waking the rest of the army.”

Deathbringer *knew* he could learn all of those things. He wanted to learn them *so badly*.

Please let me do this. Don’t make me stay here for six more years instead.

He’d heard rumors about this new strategy. The other dragon tribes were locked in a vicious war, and it was up to the NightWings to make sure it went the right way. Assassinating specific targets was part one of the plan … but making sure no one ever found out the NightWings were involved was parts two, three, four, and five.

Secrecy: that was the NightWing watchword.

And also the reason for keeping dragonets away from the other tribes. The older dragons didn’t trust anyone under ten to keep their mouths shut if they were ever captured by, say, the SkyWings or SandWings.

“He can’t learn to be an efficient assassin from here,” Quickstrike went on. “And if I die on this mission, you’ll have no assassin, and no way to train another.”

“Can’t you train an older dragon?” Greatness said over Morrowseer’s skeptical snort. “Choose someone who’s already ten.”

“Like Vengeance,” Morrowseer suggested. “Or Slaughter. They would love to practice killing other dragons.”

“Vengeance and Slaughter both have boulders for brains,” said Quickstrike. “Deathbringer could stab out their eyes and tie their tails in knots before they even noticed he was on the same island as them. I want him and no one else. He can keep your secrets, even though he’s young. And I’m not leaving him here to be trained by someone inferior to me.”

“This has nothing to do with him being your son, I suppose,” Morrowseer hissed.

“I don’t treat him like a son,” Quickstrike growled. “I treat him like a student. He’s my apprentice. The council agreed to that when he hatched; that’s why he’s called Deathbringer. And he’s lived up to the name. He’ll be the greatest NightWing assassin of all time if you let me take him on this mission.”

Please say yes, Deathbringer prayed. *Please please please say yes.*

“He’s killed *one* MudWing prisoner,” Morrowseer said. “That’s hardly a prediction of future murderous greatness. Leave him with me and I’ll make sure —”

“I would *never* leave him with you!” Quickstrike shrieked.

“Wait,” Greatness called over the two dragons’ shouting. “Stop! Shh! The queen is speaking.”

Silence fell in the council chamber. Deathbringer had seen this before: Greatness leaning toward the Queen’s Eye, listening intently to the voice only she could hear.

“The queen has a proposal,” she said finally. “The dragonet must prove himself to be as good as you claim, Quickstrike. If he can kill either Vengeance or Slaughter tonight, in stealth, before the sun rises, then he can go with you. If not, then you must choose one or both of them instead.”

There was a long pause.

Why is she hesitating? Deathbringer wondered. *Doesn’t she know I can do this?*

“What if — what if one of them catches him and kills him?” Quickstrike asked, her voice suddenly much slower than usual.

“Then we’ll know he was all wrong for this mission,” Morrowseer said with a smug chuckle.

“Tonight,” Greatness said. “This is his one chance, if you think he’s really ready. Or if not, you can choose not to test him. Then you must leave him here when you fly to the continent tomorrow.”

Tomorrow? Quickstrike was leaving so soon?

Deathbringer tightened his jaw muscles. *I’m going with her, no matter what it takes.*

The first step was finding Vengeance and Slaughter, which should have been easy after Quickstrike’s training. One of Deathbringer’s regular assignments was memorizing the new guard roster and the rotating hunting schedule every week. So he knew that Slaughter was supposed to be on watch, patrolling the outer towers, and Vengeance was not scheduled for hunting.

But he also knew these dragons, at least by reputation. They were cousins, both of them bad-tempered and mean to everyone except each other. Even from a distance, Deathbringer knew that Slaughter was lazy and Vengeance was greedy and disobedient.

He also knew that no one had been enforcing the guards’ duties since Battlewinner’s — disappearance? Retirement? Whatever she was doing behind those screens. Greatness was too overwhelmed, Morrowseer was focused on the prophecy, and most NightWings felt that patrolling and guarding were stupid, unnecessary tasks that no one should have to do. After all, if none of the other tribes could *find* the NightWings, then what was there to guard against?

So probably the last place he’d find Slaughter was patrolling on the outer towers. And Vengeance could easily be slithering around hunting when he wasn’t supposed to be.

But the most likely scenario? Was that they were both fast asleep.

Deathbringer considered finding his mother first — she’d left the council chamber with Greatness and Morrowseer. He knew she was expecting to meet him back at the dragonet sleeping caves. But he already knew his assignment, and he wanted to prove he could do it without her help. Midnight was fast approaching. There weren’t many hours for him to complete his mission.

He closed his eyes and consulted the map in his head. Slaughter and Vengeance both slept in communal caves with other NightWings; he could find those easily, but it would be very difficult to kill them stealthily if other

dragons were there.

Vengeance's cave was the closest — and Vengeance was in luck, because two dragons were playing a game with bones and tiny skulls in the entranceway. Deathbringer glanced in, acting casual, as he went by. He didn't think Vengeance was one of the three sleeping dragons in the far niches, but he had no way to make sure without drawing attention.

So, Slaughter's cave. Up a long, winding tunnel, past the library, past the throne room, down another tunnel.

The hall was empty. No sounds came from the yawning mouth of the cave ahead.

Deathbringer crept toward it on silent talons.

A faint sound made him freeze for a moment. It came again, and he realized it was a snore, but nothing like the giant snores he heard every night from Strongwings, the noisiest sleeper in the fortress. He waited a moment, then crept forward again until he could see into the cave.

Six sleeping dragons, their black wings rising and falling as they dreamed.

He slipped between them, studying their faces in the orange glow from the walls.

And there he was. Slaughter, fast asleep, drooling a little. He was too thin, like most NightWings, and had a twitchy, furious look, even in his sleep. Deathbringer remembered him from a training class in which Slaughter had injured a small dragonet by playing too rough and then bragged about it afterward.

He'd be no big loss to the tribe.

And yet — he was a NightWing. A dragon Deathbringer had actually spoken to. A member of his tribe.

The weight of the order suddenly hit Deathbringer like a cave collapsing. Could he really bring himself to kill a fellow NightWing? In his sleep, no less, like a coward?

Not like a coward. Like an assassin. Stealth is the whole point. This is what I've been training for.

The sleeping dragon let out a long sigh through his nose, breathing smoke into Deathbringer's eyes. Deathbringer blinked until he could see clearly again, keeping the rest of his body as still as a stalactite.

If I don't do this, I'll be left alone here. His father was dead. He had no brothers or sisters. His mother could be gone on this mission for years, she'd said. *What will happen to my training? Will Morrowseer take over? What will he turn me into?*

I need to go with Quickstrike.

Not only that, but going with her would mean leaving the Night Kingdom, which was everyone's dream. The continent was safe (apart from the war), and clean (apart from the other dragons), and there was so much prey there that he'd be able to eat *every day*.

That's where his destiny was. The greatest assassin in Pyrrhia would never hesitate over a small matter like killing one of his own. The queen herself had ordered this.

His claws wavered in the air as he reached for Slaughter's throat.

He'd do it to me in a heartbeat. He wouldn't need a reason, just an order.

That's the real test: Can I follow orders? Will I do exactly as I'm told, no matter what it is?

I can. I will.

Slaughter was about to draw his last breath when suddenly there was a scraping noise from the hallway. Deathbringer pressed himself to the floor, out of sight of the entrance.

Heavy talons stepped into the room. Deathbringer could hear wingtips brushing the roof and the sound of a growl in the back of someone's throat.

He crept backward, away from the rocky niche where Slaughter slept, until he was hidden behind the next sleeping spot and the snoring dragon there.

But he could still see the top of the wings that approached Slaughter's bed, and he could hear the whispering voice that woke him.

"Slaughter," it hissed. "Wake up. Silently. Come with me."

Slaughter let out a long grumbling whine and then a muffled yelp as whoever it was wrapped strong claws around his snout.

"I said silently. Get up."

Scrambling noises followed. If Slaughter thought *that* was silent, then he *definitely* shouldn't be allowed on any stealth missions. *He'd probably get Quickstrike killed,* Deathbringer thought angrily.

"What's happening?" Slaughter whispered as the two dragons began to

pad out of the cave.

“Someone is coming to kill you,” the other dragon growled. “But we’re going to prepare you to kill him first.”

Morrowseer. Deathbringer had guessed it from the moment he heard the talonsteps. Morrowseer was sabotaging his chances of completing the mission. Fury gripped Deathbringer in its powerful claws.

Breathe through it. Don’t get caught. Don’t do anything foolish. Don’t let your rage be the queen of you.

Don’t let him win.

“Wow,” Slaughter said, sounding a little more awake. “Great. I’ve been *asking* for someone to kill for *ages*.”

Deathbringer waited until they were just outside the cave and then he glided after them, navigating the other sleeping dragons cautiously. He glanced around the corner and spotted Morrowseer leading Slaughter up the tunnel toward the throne room.

“Where is your cousin?” Morrowseer growled at Slaughter, who was still rubbing his eyes and making sleepy noises.

“How should I know?” Slaughter grumbled. “Sleeping? Like anyone would be?”

“No, he’s not there,” Morrowseer said.

“Then hunting, I guess,” Slaughter said with a shrug.

“It’s not his turn —” Morrowseer stopped with a hiss. “Yes. You’re probably right.” They reached the narrowest part of the tunnel, where dragons could only walk single file, and Morrowseer strode ahead, muttering furiously.

“Who’s trying to kill me?” Slaughter asked. “Do I get to kill them with a spear or with my bare claws?”

Deathbringer darted along the wall until he was right behind Slaughter. In a pouch around his neck, deadly silver discs thumped against his chest. He’d only started training with them last week; normally he’d be more comfortable with his claws. But the discs were faster and quieter. He’d only have one shot to get this right. Carefully, he slipped one out and palmed it.

“A dragonet with an inflated sense of his own abilities,” Morrowseer called back. “He’s been told that he will be a great assassin one day, and the queen has decided —”

As the huge dragon kept speaking, Deathbringer leaped onto Slaughter's back, clamped his snout shut, and slid the serrated edge of the silver disc neatly from one ear to the other, across Slaughter's throat.

There was a soft bubbling sigh from the wound, and then a gentle thud as Deathbringer lowered Slaughter's head to the floor. Both were muffled by the echoing sound of Morrowseer's voice waxing on about impertinence.

By the time Morrowseer turned around, Slaughter was dead, and Deathbringer was gone.

Quickstrike was pacing in front of the dragonet sleeping caves, her forehead furrowed with anxiety in a way Deathbringer had never seen before.

"Deathbringer!" she cried when he appeared from the shadows. "Where have you been? Why didn't you follow my orders?"

"I did," Deathbringer said, surprised. "I was there. I heard your whole meeting with the queen."

"You — but I didn't sense you there —" She eyed him with distrustful, glittering eyes. "Are you lying to me?"

"I wouldn't!" he said indignantly. "I hid myself well, just like you taught me. I was listening the whole time. You're leaving for the continent tomorrow and I'm going with you."

"No," she said. "You're not. You have to stay here."

"Not according to what I heard," he said. He held out his talons, still coated in Slaughter's blood. "See? Mission completed. We can leave at sunrise."

She stared down at his blood-soaked claws. "What — what did you —"

"Exactly what you've been training me for," he said. He'd expected a slightly more delighted reaction, he had to admit to himself. "Slaughter is dead. No thanks to Morrowseer, who tried to warn him, which is pretty rude, don't you think?"

"You did it?" she whispered. "You really killed Slaughter?"

He described the kill to her, the way she'd described her kills to him many times, using precise, swift language to capture the fight in as many heartbeats as it had taken to complete it.

"Why do you look so worried?" he asked when he finished. "I was following Queen Battlewinner's orders."

“I was going to tell you not to do it,” she said, rubbing her forehead. “Because it was too dangerous.”

“Oh,” Deathbringer said. “But … it worked out so yay?”

“It’s still dangerous,” said Quickstrike. “Morrowseer will want to punish you. He won’t be pleased that one of his pets is dead.”

Deathbringer shrugged. “He agreed to the deal. He should have known what would happen.”

“He could still cause trouble for us. Or he could force us to bring Vengeance along as well, who will hate you and try to hurt you for what you did to his cousin.”

Deathbringer wasn’t concerned. He knew he could take Vengeance as easily as Slaughter, even if both of them were more than twice his size.

Quickstrike thought for a brief moment, then sighed a curl of smoke. “There’s only one thing we can do — leave right now,” she said. “If it’s already done, no one can stop us. Do you need anything?”

“No,” Deathbringer said, feeling as if all his blood had been replaced with lightning. He could fly all the way to the sun if she told him to. “I’m ready. Let’s go!”

Moments later, they were aloft. The Night Kingdom was fading away behind them, and Deathbringer’s great future as an assassin was spread out before him like the sunrise.

Two weeks into their expedition, they paused on the east coast of Pyrrhia, a short flight north of the Diamond Spray Delta. Here the forest crowded up toward the ocean, leaving only a strip of pebbled beach populated by arrogant seagulls and befuddled seals.

“Our first target is a SeaWing.” Quickstrike spread her wings for balance as waves lapped the rock below her.

In two weeks of training and scouting, so far no NightWings had found them. Deathbringer kept dreaming of black wings descending from the sky, with talons clutching a scroll that commanded his return so he could be punished for murder.

He wasn’t quite sure where these nightmares came from. During the day, he didn’t worry about that at all. He knew he’d followed his queen’s orders. He’d earned his place on this mission.

And it was *glorious* to be here, flying through snowy mountains and thick forests and over the beautiful sea. They'd avoided all other dragons carefully — NightWings weren't supposed to be seen, if they could help it — so mostly they'd been keeping to untouched parts of the continent, full of prey that could be caught and eaten as easily as picking fruit. Quickstrike had been running new training exercises with him every day, under blue skies, in wind that smelled like a million possibilities.

Deathbringer had never been so happy. If NightWings came to take him back, he thought sometimes that he just wouldn't go. He'd run off and live alone in the forests instead.

Not really, of course. He'd follow orders, as he always had. But if they couldn't ever *find* him to *give* him those orders, that would be fine by him.

"What SeaWing?" he asked, circling over her head.

"First, tell me who they're allied with," Quickstrike ordered.

Deathbringer landed on the beach, not far from the boulder where she was perched. He started writing in the sand with one claw.

"There are three sisters who want the empty SandWing throne," he recited. "The oldest, Burn, who has control of the main SandWing stronghold. At the moment, she's got the SkyWings on her side, probably by offering them territory along the Great Five-Tail River.

"Next, Blister, the smartest sister. She's allied with the SeaWings and the MudWings, and nobody knows where her base or her SandWing followers are.

"Finally, Blaze, the youngest and reportedly not the sharpest claw on the dragon. She's hiding with the IceWings, but slowly winning support from SandWings who have fled the desert due to Burn's cruelty."

"That's right," Quickstrike said. "As of now, Blister is the most powerful, to the point where we are worried that she could win the war in the next few months. She's smart and devious and pays her soldiers very well, and her allies cover a vast swath of territory. We need to slow her down."

"Because we don't want her to win," Deathbringer said.

"Because we don't want *anyone* to win for another ten years," said Quickstrike, her black eyes glittering.

"I see," said Deathbringer, watching a pair of green crabs march obliviously across his claws. "So our mission is to drag out the war."

“There’s a plan in place,” said Quickstrike. The wind buffeted her wings and she dug her claws into the rock. “Every piece of it must work in order to ensure the future of the NightWing tribe. This is our piece, and it starts with Commander Tempest.”

“The SeaWing,” said Deathbringer. “Our target.”

“Yes. Blister has found a military ally as smart as she is, but even more fearless. In the last few months, Commander Tempest has led forays into SkyWing and SandWing territory that have been devastating for Burn’s army. Between her and Blister, they could win this war.”

“But they won’t,” Deathbringer said confidently. He sank his talons into the sand, spreading his wings to feel the sea breeze. “We’ll stop them.”

“It’s not that easy.” Quickstrike shook her head. “The SeaWings have two palaces — the Summer Palace and the Deep Palace — but no one knows where either of those are, and they’re probably underwater. You’re very talented, but I haven’t noticed you sprout gills lately.”

“What if we kill Blister instead?” Deathbringer suggested. “She must be out on land somewhere, right?”

“*Absolutely not,*” Quickstrike snapped with sudden ferocity. “You must not kill any of the three queens! It would ruin everything! Leave them alive *at all costs*, do you understand?”

Deathbringer blinked up at her. He didn’t understand at all — but he could see that he wasn’t supposed to. He was supposed to follow orders and let the plan unfold according to someone else’s master agenda.

“All right,” he said. “But Blister and Tempest must meet somewhere to discuss strategy — somewhere where Blister can breathe. If we can find that place, we can kill Tempest.”

“Exactly.” She regarded him for a long moment, her wings outlined by the sun behind her. “And what’s the most important part of our mission?”

“Don’t be seen,” he said immediately. “Don’t get caught. Never let anyone know the NightWings are meddling in the war.”

Quickstrike nodded, looking faintly pleased, which was the most pleased she ever managed to look. “Very good. And if you do get caught —”

“I’m a rogue NightWing, exiled from my tribe, causing trouble because I’m insane,” Deathbringer said. “Try to get them to kill me quick before they can torture me.”

“Especially Blister. I’ve heard that her torture methods are … very effective.”

“Don’t worry.” Deathbringer took to the air and shook the sand off his tail. “You’ve trained me well.”

The Bay of a Thousand Scales was circled by a spur of land that resembled a dragon’s tail, getting narrower and narrower as they flew toward the end of it. They searched along the coastline first, looking for any signs of a secret encampment that could hide an entire SandWing army. Quickstrike didn’t know exactly how many SandWings had followed Blister out of the desert, but it had to be a substantial number, given how well they were doing in the war.

Usually they searched at night, when their scales were camouflaged by darkness. Deathbringer had found his night vision growing stronger the longer he was away from the Night Kingdom. And they were lucky to have two of the three moons nearly full: Their silver light illuminated any movement on the beaches and cliffs below.

On the second night, they flew over a spot where several fires glowed, and Deathbringer was sure that was it. But when they swooped lower, they found mysteriously small stone buildings, almost like a miniature castle surrounded by little fortresses, and upon further investigation these all turned out to be inhabited by scavengers.

A few of the little two-legged creatures looked up from the battlements as the dragons flew overhead, and one even shot flaming arrows at them, which was pretty adorable.

“I didn’t know scavengers could build castles,” Deathbringer said to his mother.

“I’m sure they can’t,” she said. “I’m guessing they found that den the way it was and infested it.”

“But who else could have built it?” he asked. “It’s too small for dragons.”

She shrugged, uninterested, but Deathbringer thought about it for the rest of the night.

Finally they gave up on the coastline and began to search the islands, which was no small task given that there were at least a thousand of them as far as Deathbringer could see.

He offered several ideas on how to lure the dragons out of hiding, but Quickstrike shot them all down.

“Impatience is not a useful quality in an assassin,” she said sternly.

“Neither is taking three thousand years to complete a mission,” he retorted. They were taking a rest on a small sandbar. Overhead, ominous gray clouds gathered, mumbling about their nefarious plans for the night.

“NightWings play a long game,” she informed him. “We use our superior intelligence to tilt events our way, but we must never do it so obviously that the other tribes notice.”

“I just want to set *one* palm tree on fire and see who comes to check it out,” Deathbringer argued. “They’ll never know it was a pair of NightWings.”

“No,” she said. “Too risky.”

“Bah,” he said, but didn’t press the point. *Obey your elders, do as you’re told,* he reminded himself. Even if it meant another long night of flying in what appeared to be an impending hurricane.

The storm caught them suddenly when they were over a stretch of open sea. Rain pelted furiously in their eyes and dragged down their wings as if trying to feed the dragons to the roaring ocean.

“We have to land!” Quickstrike shouted to Deathbringer. She pointed to the nearest lump of island they could see through the driving rain. But as he turned to follow her, another movement caught his eye, and he batted his mother’s tail to make her wait.

Below them, barely staying above the waves, a bedraggled sand-colored dragon was flapping along with his head down. He looked neither left nor right, and he certainly didn’t look up to see the NightWings, who exchanged a glance and then followed him.

The SandWing’s flight was crooked, but dogged — he was clearly determined to make it through the gale, whatever it took. After a while, Deathbringer saw an island ahead that had to be his destination. It looked wildly overgrown — the kind of place where an army might be hidden below the trees, and two dragons flying overhead could easily miss them.

Deathbringer was fairly unimpressed with the SandWing, who didn’t even check once whether he was being followed before he crash-landed on the beach and hurried into the trees.

“That must be it,” Quickstrike said. She flicked her forked tongue out and

in with a laugh. “We found them.”

“Now we wait for Commander Tempest,” said Deathbringer.

Quickstrike stretched her wings as lightning flashed around them. “And then we kill her.”

Lightning flashed again as she turned, scanning the horizon for an island where they could keep watch and wait out the storm.

“Over there,” Deathbringer said, swooping below her.

And then suddenly there was a crash like the sky ripping open. Blinding light sizzled against Deathbringer’s eyeballs and Quickstrike let out an agonized shriek. She thudded into him hard and he smelled burning scales.

He scrambled for a hold on her, wet claws slipping on soaked scales. She was too big — he couldn’t possibly fly with her, not while she was unconscious, not as far as the next island.

It was all he could do to steer their tumbling course down to the beach where the SandWing had landed. He rolled to land first, cushioning her fall with a jarring shock that vibrated through all his bones.

The torrential downpour continued as they lay there, half buried in wet sand. Deathbringer tried to take a deep breath, but it felt like drowning.

Quickstrike was splayed out in the middle of the beach, her eyes closed and her wings askew like ragged curtains. He couldn’t see the spot where the lightning had hit her — it was impossible in the dark against her black scales, with spots still flashing in front of his lightning-dazzled eyes.

But he could see that they were completely exposed here, with Blister camped who knew how many heartbeats away. If she had diligent guards posted, they might have been spotted already. Their only chance was hoping that the hurricane had driven the guards under cover — but even if it had, that wouldn’t last.

“Quickstrike,” he cried in her ear. He shook her shoulder, but she didn’t respond. “Mother, wake up. We have to hide. Mother!”

Nothing. He wiped raindrops from his eyes and scanned the beach. Up by the tree line there was a cluster of fallen palm trees, perhaps hit by lightning in an earlier storm. That would have to work.

Deathbringer tucked his mother’s wings in close to her and dug himself into the sand below her, using all his weight to roll her up the beach, one struggling, aching, muscle-screaming step at a time. Wet sand clumped

between his claws and splattered into his mouth and coated Quickstrike's scales. He felt as if he was metamorphosing into a MudWing, and maybe from there into some kind of worm, squashed under someone's talon at the bottom of a mud puddle.

But finally, finally he gave one last shove and she slid over the rise and down into a hollow between the fallen trees. With the last bit of his strength, Deathbringer dragged over the biggest palm fronds and rammed one of the trunks into a better position. *Make sure it looks natural. Like it always fell this way.* He scooped sand into an embankment all around his mother until she was as well hidden as he could possibly make her.

His legs were shaking as he returned to the beach with one of the palm fronds. *One more thing to do. Wipe away all our prints, all traces that we were here. Quick, before someone sees.*

The rain might take care of the evidence for him, but his training wouldn't let him risk it. Deathbringer gritted his teeth and swept the beach, trying to hide not only his talonprints but the churned-up sand trail that led directly to their hiding spot.

The rain was helping, as were the towering waves that were trying to eat the entire beach. Deathbringer tramped around making a mess of the whole area, until at last he felt as though he'd done everything he could. He dragged himself back to his mother, dug himself a hole in the sand, and fell instantly asleep in the howling storm.

Two days passed, but Quickstrike didn't wake up. She was breathing, but nothing Deathbringer did could get a response from her. In the daylight he could see an awful burn zigzagged across one of her wings, but all he could do to treat it was keep it cool and wet.

Will she ever fly again?

How am I going to get her home?

And what about the mission?

He knew what Quickstrike would say. The mission comes first. The mission is everything.

If I were the one hit by lightning, she'd have gone ahead and finished the mission already.

That's what she'd want me to do.

That's what she'd order *me to do.*

If I get it over with, I can focus on how to get her home.

So at midnight on the second day, he left their hiding spot and crept into the island jungle, feeling his way cautiously through the unfamiliar terrain. Strange hoots and yelps came from the trees; he couldn't tell what was bird, monkey, frog, or insect, but they all seemed to have strong opinions about something.

Finally he heard an indisputably dragon sound: talons stamping and voices muttering.

"I hate being on night watch," said one of them. "I swear things are crawling on me."

"Can't see anything anyway with all these toad-spawned trees in the way," grumbled the other.

Deathbringer slipped past them silently. Soon after that he came to a break in the trees and saw a lagoon below him, the still water dappled with silver moonlight. Tents were set up all along the beach. He studied the encampment for a moment, noting that there were no fires and that the tents were all the same color as the sand. From the sky, it would be easy to overlook them.

There also weren't as many tents as he'd expect for a whole army camp. Perhaps the rest of the soldiers were hidden in the trees, or scattered on other islands. *That's what I'd do — spread out over several islands so no one could attack us all at once.*

He crouched lower as three dragons slithered out of the largest tent. In the moonlight, it was hard to be sure, but he thought that two of them had the broad, flat foreheads of MudWings. He could see the dangerous curve of the third dragon's tail; that was definitely a SandWing. Was it Blister herself?

"It's a smart plan," said one of the MudWings. "Did Commander Tempest come up with it?"

"No," said the SandWing coldly.

"Well, we'll need her to make it work. The SeaWings will only risk it if she convinces them to."

"I know." The SandWing lashed her tail. "It would be helpful if they would listen to *me* a little bit more."

"This could put the SandWing stronghold under our control," said the other MudWing. "That could win us the war."

“Yes,” hissed the SandWing. “It may have escaped your notice, but that *is* the point of all this.”

The second MudWing swung his head toward her with an expression Deathbringer couldn’t read in the dark.

“The point for us,” he said, “is to keep our tribe safe. You promised Queen Moorhen that an alliance with you would protect us from an invasion by the SeaWings. She only agreed because she knew Commander Tempest could be a serious threat. She does not particularly care who sits on the SandWing throne, and neither do I.”

“Commander Tempest will be here tomorrow,” the SandWing said smoothly. “We’ll reconvene then.”

Tomorrow. I could kill her tomorrow and be done with the mission.

Then what? Fly home, report my success, and get help? Could anyone get here in time to save Quickstrike?

Deathbringer wanted to go back and check on Quickstrike, but he thought he shouldn’t risk moving around the jungle too much, especially since then he’d have to return during the daytime. So he found a shadowy tree with a good view of the biggest tent and curled onto one of the higher branches to wait.

The next morning was unusually cold, the kind where setting something on fire would have been very helpful. But of course he couldn’t do that. Deathbringer rubbed his talons together as quietly as he could. His eyes felt tired, as if someone had rolled heavy boulders up against the back of his eyeballs.

One thing he had noticed since leaving the Night Kingdom was that his sleep patterns seemed to be shifting. In the fortress, he had always lived on a regimented schedule of morning training, but both he and Quickstrike had found themselves staying awake longer and longer each night, and then sleeping later and later each morning. The brighter the moons were, the more wide-awake Deathbringer felt.

He didn’t mind the change, although he had to admit it made early-morning assassination watch a lot more painful.

The morning crawled on and the sun scraped slowly up the sky, which remained empty of dragon wings. Nobody arrived. Nobody left. Dragons poked their heads out of their tents or patrolled along the edge of the lagoon.

Most of them were SandWings, with a few MudWings here and there. Deathbringer got the feeling that everyone was waiting, exactly as he was.

Finally his attention was caught by an enormous splash off to his right. He lifted his head to look and saw a small whale come surging out of the water, thrashing and twisting. A moment later, sharp blue claws sank into the whale's sides and it was dragged back under, disappearing in a cloud of red bubbles.

He stared at the spot intently and realized that there were ripples extending far out from that spot … as if a parade of sea dragons were swimming their way.

Sure enough, a few moments later, an enormous blue-green SeaWing emerged from the water, shaking her wings vigorously. She was powerfully built, as big as Morrowseer, with broad shoulders and gleaming teeth and a healing burn scar on her neck, and she had a trident longer than Deathbringer strapped to her back.

Holy mother of lava, Deathbringer thought. *I'm supposed to kill* THAT*?*

Commander Tempest was followed by two more SeaWings: a big green male dragon with dark green eyes and gold bands around his ankles, and a wiry female with small eyes and dark gray-blue scales. Behind them, keeping their scales in the water as they eyed the troops on the beach, were about twenty other SeaWing soldiers.

"Blister!" Commander Tempest shouted, stamping one foot in the sand. "We're here! Let's get this over with!"

The SandWing from the night before emerged slowly from her tent, holding her head high. Even from a distance, Deathbringer could see her eyes glittering with danger. A pattern of black diamond scales ran along her back and real black diamonds hung from her ears, outlined in white gold. An aura of menace seemed to surround her.

Even standing next to the towering SeaWing commander, Blister was still the most terrifying dragon on the island.

"So pleased you've finally chosen to join us," Blister said, stopping far enough away that she wouldn't have to look up at Tempest. "Will Queen Coral be attending at last?"

"Ha," Tempest said in a big, jovial voice. "The queen has her own kingdom to run. She won't ever have to meet with you as long as I'm here to

handle our strategy summits. But she did send her husband, Gill." The commander swept one wing at the green dragon, nearly knocking him over, but he dodged neatly and gave Blister a charming smile.

"And this is my third-in-command, Piranha," Tempest went on, nodding at the other dragon. "I left my second watching the troops, of course. Make sure they don't have too much fun, ha!" Her booming bark of a laugh was startling every time; a cluster of seagulls nearby kept shooting into the air when it went off, then circling back to land cautiously until it happened again.

"Queen Coral sends her respects," said Gill, bowing, although not very deeply. "She has sent me to open a conversation with you about possible peace negotiations."

"Oh?" Blister glowered at him.

"Yes. We're starting to wonder if this war is really worth it for anyone involved," Gill said. "Perhaps there's a way to reach a diplomatic accord. Maybe by dividing the Kingdom of Sand among the three of you, for instance."

Deathbringer noticed that a number of MudWings had crept closer to listen. Even a few SandWings had stopped what they were doing, their heads tilted toward the cluster of dragons around Blister.

Blister regarded Gill without blinking for a long, tense moment.

"How interesting," she said at last. "I wonder if anyone involved would even consider it. Peace by negotiation. How … undragonly."

"I wager I could talk them into it," Gill said, smiling again.

"Would be fine by me," Tempest said. She stamped her foot again, splattering sand on Blister's claws. "I mean, I love being the war commander and all, but it's a messy business, aren't I right? Ha!"

Blister gave her sandy claws a withering look.

Deathbringer had a sudden, worrying thought. *I can't let Gill succeed. Quickstrike said the war must go on — if he talks everyone into peace, the NightWing plan will be ruined.*

But what do I do? Do I have to kill him, too?

That's not in my orders.

And he's married to the queen of the SeaWings. Who knows what new problems I might cause?

So how do I stop him?

His orders weren't sufficient. He had a sudden bracing image of his future — if this was always going to be his job, his orders might *never* be sufficient.

"Well," Blister said, flicking her tongue in and out. "Let's start by reviewing my new attack plan, shall we? I feel confident that if this works, the war will be over without any need for … compromises."

"Can't wait to see it," Tempest boomed. She glanced at the biggest MudWing. "Oh, hey, you're here!"

"Yes," Blister said. "We've been waiting for you for a couple of days now." She turned to sweep back into her tent.

"Weapons," the MudWing interjected.

"Right!" Commander Tempest swung the trident off her back and dropped it with a thud on the sand at her feet.

The MudWing stepped forward and placed his spear beside the trident. Blister rolled her eyes, reached into a sheath on her ankle, and tossed a wicked-looking dagger onto the pile of weapons.

Gill, Piranha, two MudWings, and a pair of SandWings did the same with their weapons, and then the entire group vanished into Blister's tent.

Deathbringer studied the discarded objects for a moment: another trident, a twisted white horn that came to a claw-sharp point, a sword, another dagger, and two more spears that matched the MudWing's.

An idea was beginning to form.

The strategy meeting went on all day, which was plenty of time for Deathbringer to get what he needed from a snoring guard in one of the jungle camps.

He realized that his claws were shaking as he moved into position. He knew he could do what he needed to … but he wasn't as certain about escaping afterward.

If I get caught, my life is over. And then what happens to Quickstrike?

He couldn't think about her in this moment. He had to focus on the mission, as she would have ordered.

But is this the right thing to do? Would she approve? Would she tell me to be stealthier?

There was no way to know; he was the only one here who could make this decision.

And they were coming out of the tent now. He had to do this *now*.

Blister emerged first, her face a mask of barely concealed displeasure. Behind her came the MudWing general, and directly behind him was Commander Tempest.

“You’re right, you’re right,” Tempest said, shaking her head. “Between our three armies, this plan could work. I’m real tempted by this idea of a peace accord, though — aren’t you, Swamp?”

“General Swamp,” corrected the MudWing. “I’d have to ask my queen. We would, above all else, require a promise from the SeaWings to —”

The spear whistled slightly as it flew through the air, giving Commander Tempest just enough time to raise her head and see it coming — but not enough time to get out of the way.

The blade plunged into her heart. Her eyes widened as she stared down at the long wooden shaft piercing her chest.

“Well, son of a starfish,” she said, and then toppled over onto the sand like a slow avalanche.

Piranha, just stepping out of the tent, saw her fallen commander and shrieked with rage.

“Tempest!” Gill cried, pushing past Piranha. “Tempest, no! Tempest!” He rolled her onto her back and pressed his claws against the blood spurting from the wound.

It wouldn’t help. Deathbringer was too well trained; the spear had landed exactly where he’d aimed and the assassination was complete.

That was only the first part of the plan, though.

“Search the trees!” Piranha roared. “Find who did this!” The SeaWing soldiers leaped from the water and swarmed up the beach.

Deathbringer drew his wings closer and froze, a shadow among shadows in the upper branches of a tree, concealed by several large birds’ nests, a wild structure of branches constructed by monkeys, and a giant spiderweb. He could hear dragons thrashing through the bushes below him.

Don’t move. Don’t move. Don’t … move … a muscle …

“There’s a note,” said one of the SandWings, spotting the leaf that was wedged into the end of the spear. She tugged it loose and spread it on the sand beside Gill, but he was leaning against Tempest’s side and his shoulders were shaking with sobs.

Stop feeling guilty, Deathbringer ordered himself. *You're an assassin. This is what you do. You followed orders. It's for a greater cause.*

Would be nice to know what that greater cause is, *though.*

Blister snatched the note out of her soldier's talons and scanned it rapidly.

THIS IS WHAT WE THINK ABOUT YOUR SECRET DEAL WITH BLISTER. STAY IN THE WATER WHERE YOU BELONG! THE COAST OF THE MUD KINGDOM IS OURS!

For an anxious moment, Deathbringer thought that Blister might set the note on fire, but Piranha seized it first.

"What?" she sputtered, staring at the words on the leaf. She whirled to stare at the weapon. "That's a *MudWing* spear! One of *your* dragons did this!" She stabbed a claw at General Swamp.

"Why would we do that?" he shouted. He grabbed the note from her and read it. "What secret deal? WHAT SECRET DEAL?"

"There is no secret deal," Blister said. "Someone is trying to break up this alliance, obviously."

Oooooh, Deathbringer thought, impressed with her calm.

"Have you promised the SeaWings part of our land?" General Swamp roared.

"Did you have our commander killed to stop us from getting it?" Piranha snarled back.

"AHA!" he bellowed. "You ADMIT IT!"

"We don't want your stupid land!" Piranha shrieked. "But we're certainly going to take it now!"

Gill looked up, his face streaked with tears. "Wait," he said. "Wait, let's — nobody say anything we might regret — we should —"

"We found these two in the trees up there," called a SeaWing soldier. He and three others pushed two confused MudWings out onto the beach, passing right below Deathbringer's perch. "Exactly where the spear came from."

"We didn't do that!" protested one of the brown dragons. "We don't know anything about it!"

"So someone else snuck past you and did it? And you're the worst guards in the Bay of a Thousand Scales, is that what you're admitting?" Piranha barked.

"Listen, wet nose," the guard snapped back, "you don't know anything about guarding on land, so take your sanctimonious —"

“I demand that these murderers be executed!” Piranha roared.

“Piranha!” Gill tried to protest.

“It wasn’t a MudWing!” General Swamp roared back. “It was probably *her*!” He jabbed one claw at Blister. “She never liked Tempest! When you weren’t here, she was always complaining about how loud and smelly she was or how everyone always worshipped her like pathetic big-eyed manatees!”

“That’s rather inaccurate,” Blister protested, raising her voice slightly. “I’ve never compared anyone to a manatee in my life.”

Piranha whirled toward Blister, lashing her tail furiously. “Kill these MudWing assassins right now, or your alliance with the SeaWings is over.”

“Touch one scale on their heads and you lose the MudWings forever,” hissed General Swamp.

They both glared at Blister. An eerie stillness had fallen over the SandWing; her nostrils flared as if she could smell the treachery in the air.

“SandWings,” she said in her cold, hard voice. “Search the island. *Thoroughly.* Turn over every log; climb every tree; wade into every pool. Find the dragon who did this. It will be a SkyWing, or an IceWing, or one of my sisters’ SandWings — any SandWing who doesn’t belong here. When you find that dragon, bring it to me, and I will kill it, and then we can move on from this foolish distraction.”

The SandWing soldiers fanned out immediately, moving with such precision that Deathbringer wondered whether they’d done this kind of search before. He could imagine that Blister was paranoid enough to command something like this regularly.

“And if you find no one?” General Swamp growled.

“Then,” Blister said, “it must have been one of your MudWings, don’t you agree?”

“I do not,” he snapped.

“What are we going to do without her?” Gill said mournfully. He folded Tempest’s wings in gently and closed her eyes.

“She’s only one dragon,” said Blister. “We’ll still win the war. Bring me Queen Coral and I’ll explain how.”

Gill didn’t answer. Silence fell over the small group on the beach.

Deathbringer had never been so still for so long. The shadows lengthened,

stretching toward night, as SandWings tore through the bushes below him. One even climbed his tree, peering horribly intently at Deathbringer's frozen outline, but when one of her wings got caught in the spiderweb she started cursing and climbed down again.

In the gray twilight, Blister's soldiers began to gather on the edge of the lagoon in front of her, reporting one after another that the island was empty of enemy dragons.

The last pair of soldiers that came in bowed deeply, and then one of them said, "We found someone."

Blister tensed, her tail poised as though she could cut the air around her. "What did you do with them?"

They exchanged a glance. "It's not what you think, Your Majesty," said one. "It can't be the assassin you're looking for. This one's a NightWing, and she's been hit by lightning, and she's unconscious."

"Half dead, I'd say," agreed the other soldier.

Stupid stupid stupid. Deathbringer wanted to rip off his own ears. He should have gone back and hidden her better before carrying out this plan. He should have known Blister would search the island so carefully. *I was so wrapped up in the mission, I completely forgot about protecting Quickstrike.*

"Could someone have been with her?" Blister asked.

"Doubt it," one of the soldiers answered. "Didn't see any other talonprints around her. Looks like she got hit, crashed on the beach, pulled herself to shelter, and lost consciousness. Probably in that storm a couple nights back."

"A NightWing, out here," Blister mused. "How curious. Did you try waking her up?"

"Yeah — yes, Your Majesty — but I doubt she'll ever wake up again. Barely breathing at all, you know?"

"Fine," Blister snapped. "This is clearly irrelevant. Make her completely dead and then come back."

They nodded and flew away.

Deathbringer's life was falling through his talons.

Go after them! his heart screamed. *Stop them! You can kill them easily! Save her!*

But then my cover would be blown. I could never get her out of here without being caught. They'd know I was the one who assassinated

Commander Tempest; they'd know I'm not a rogue NightWing acting crazy. They'd kill Quickstrike anyway. They'd kill me, they'd all swear vengeance on the NightWings, and their alliance would be stronger than ever.

All of this would be for nothing.

Silent tears slid down his snout, but he kept his position.

He did not move.

He followed orders.

But this will never happen again, he vowed. *If I ever find someone else to care about, I will not let my mission come first. I will break any order. I'll endanger my own tribe if I have to.*

I will make up for this somehow. Someday.

The good news was, a NightWing messenger was waiting in the agreed-upon spot at the exact agreed-upon time, midnight, one month after Quickstrike and Deathbringer had left the kingdom.

The bad news was, it was Morrowseer.

Well, Deathbringer thought, *here goes nothing.*

"Hello there," he said, landing beside the huge black dragon.

Morrowseer gave him a disdainful look. "You are not worth my breath," he snorted. "Where is Quickstrike?"

"Not coming tonight," Deathbringer said breezily, the way he'd practiced a million times on the way here. "She sent me."

"That's …" Morrowseer paused and regarded him for a moment. "Aggravating. I don't do business with sniveling dragonets."

"Then you're in luck," said Deathbringer. "I am firmly anti-sniveling myself."

"I see what she's up to." Morrowseer flicked his tail. "She thought if you both showed up, I might insist on dragging you back home where you belong. But if it's just you, I have to let you go so you can take the new instructions back to her. Very clever."

Deathbringer kept his face neutral. "I've always admired Quickstrike's intelligence, too."

"That was quite a stunt you pulled with Slaughter," Morrowseer said with an affected yawn. "You're probably better off staying out of the kingdom until Vengeance cools down. I wouldn't hold your breath, though, since to my

knowledge he was named quite appropriately."

"I'm not going to spend a moment worrying about Vengeance," Deathbringer said. "I'm here to report. Commander Tempest is dead. Blister's alliance with the SeaWings and MudWings has been destabilized. Our prediction is that the MudWings are going to abandon her altogether."

"Really?" It was pretty satisfying to see Morrowseer so surprised. "That's — better news than we had hoped for. That should slow her down significantly. She won't get far with only SeaWings."

"A potential area of concern is whether the MudWings will align themselves with one of the other sisters," Deathbringer went on. "And we recommend keeping a close eye on a SeaWing named Gill, who appears to be intent on brokering peace.

"Although," Deathbringer added quickly, seeing the glint in the other dragon's eyes, "we wouldn't recommend another SeaWing assassination this soon after the first one. Could be suspicious, destabilize things *too* much, shift the power too far out of Blister's talons."

"True," said Morrowseer. "We'll keep an eye on the situation. In the meanwhile, you have a new assignment."

"Already? I mean — good. Who is the target?"

"A SandWing general under Burn." Morrowseer handed Deathbringer a scroll. "All the information is in there. You should be able to find him in the Kingdom of Sand. Another one who's a bit too smart and too effective for our liking."

Deathbringer unrolled the scroll, breathing a small plume of fire so he could see the rough sketch and the name written underneath.

"General Six-Claws."

"Shouldn't be too hard to identify," Morrowseer said dryly. "Presumably he'll be the one with six claws."

Deathbringer rolled up the scroll. "And meet back here in a month?" he asked.

"I'm giving you three months for this one. The Kingdom of Sand is bigger than you think, with fewer places for black dragons to hide. Your mother will have to teach you a lot of new skills for this mission."

A stab of sorrow, another in a thousand moments of hidden grief.

"I'm sure she will," said Deathbringer. "See you in three months."

Morrowseer lifted off first, winging north without a backward glance. Deathbringer watched his serpentine shape outlined against the moons until it was out of sight, and then he unrolled the scroll again.

Maybe General Six-Claws didn't have to die, exactly.

Maybe he just needed a good reason to stop working for Burn.

After all, if Deathbringer could break the MudWing alliance with Blister, maybe he could shift some other game pieces around as well.

Maybe there were other ways to be a great assassin, if you could see the bigger picture.

I'll make Morrowseer tell me everything one day.

For now … let's see how creative I can get with these orders.

Keep reading for a sneak peek of

WINGS OF FIRE

BOOK EIGHT:
ESCAPING PERIL

Deep in a cave in Jade Mountain, the most dangerous dragon in Pyrrhia was hiding.

Which she was not particularly pleased about.

"Just until Ruby's gone," Peril muttered, pacing. "That's what he said. *Hours* ago. He said he'd come get me as soon as it was safe. Ha! As if I should be afraid of her. I'm not afraid of anyone! Three moons, it's been *forever*. How long does it take to collect a body?"

And why should she have to hide anyway? That's what she wanted to know.

Yes, she was banished from the Sky Kingdom, but Queen Ruby couldn't banish her from Jade Mountain, too. Clay had said it himself: this wasn't the Sky Palace. He'd said, "You have every right to be here."

Was that true?

Did she actually have the right to be *anywhere*, after everything she'd done?

But all she wanted was to be with Clay. Near him, around him, breathing the same air and watching the same skies. That wasn't asking too much. And if it meant she wasn't hurting anyone anymore, wasn't that what everyone wanted?

Maybe not. Maybe Queen Ruby wanted Peril to be miserable and alone.

Well. Peril hissed a tendril of smoke and marched to the cave entrance, peering out. If *any dragon* tried to keep her away from Clay, she would *melt off their heads*. Even if that dragon was the new SkyWing queen!

Unless Clay told me not to, I guess.

There had been a moment, months ago, in the chaos of the SkyWing

transition, when Peril thought things were going to be different. After she'd helped Clay and the others escape from Scarlet's arena, she'd flown back to the palace only to find Queen Scarlet and Queen Burn gone and the whole tribe in a state of panic. Who'd be in charge now? What had happened to their invincible queen?

The relief when Ruby arrived and took over … Peril remembered it clearly, with a wince of pity for her idiotic hopeful former self. Along with everyone else she had thought, *A new queen! One who isn't terrifying! Everything's going to change!*

It was true: everything *had* changed. For the better, generally, for everyone but Peril.

There had been no thank-yous, no celebrations or medals. Idiotic hopeful former self had hoped for them. Idiotic hopeful former self was very stupid.

In fact, there hadn't been any acknowledgment at all that Peril had helped the dragonets of destiny defeat Queen Scarlet. *I mean, they did most of it, but I* did *help. Didn't anyone notice?*

Instead, Ruby's very first act as queen had been to banish Peril from the Sky Kingdom.

Peril could still hear her hissing, "I never want to see you again" … and she could still feel the strange, falling vertigo it had given her, as if her wings had been sliced off.

Until that moment, Ruby had always been — not friendly, exactly — but not hostile, either. Mostly she'd been quiet. She'd stayed out of Peril's way, nodding politely in the halls or leaving the room when Peril came to talk to Scarlet. She'd never seemed very queenly, to be frank. So where did this imperious, decisive dragon come from?

"But … why?" Peril had asked, trying to ignore the expressions on the guards that surrounded Ruby. Why did they look so *pleased*?

"Because you're a murderer," Ruby replied, as if that should have been perfectly self-evident.

But aren't we all murderers? Peril had thought. *Didn't we all do terrible things because Queen Scarlet told us to? Can you find me one dragon who defied her? Why am* I *the only one getting punished for obedience?*

Then she'd looked into Ruby's eyes and realized it was personal. Ruby actually hated her. Peril had never known that — and even now, she still

wasn’t sure why. Hadn’t they both been loyal SkyWing subjects? Hadn’t they both always followed Scarlet’s orders? Couldn’t Ruby, of all dragons, understand everything that Peril had done?

“Leave now,” Ruby had said. “Or die. Whichever.”

And how do you plan to make me? Peril had felt fiery rage swelling under her scales. *I could kill you right now, as easily as breathing. I could kill everyone in this cave just by spreading my wings.*

She nearly had. She’d really, really wanted to. The only thing that had stopped her was thinking of Clay.

He said he saw good in her. Which *probably* meant he didn’t want her setting large groups of dragons on fire every time she got mad.

He thought she could be more than Queen Scarlet’s pet killer, and so, for him, she would be.

Well … she would *try*.

It was *hard*, though. Dragons could be *awful*. Some of them really *deserved* to be set on fire.

And she didn’t *like* being told to sit in a cave for hours, just because the sight of her might make Ruby angry. The SkyWing queen was on her way to Jade Mountain to collect the body of the student who’d died, Carnelian. So, yes, she probably wouldn’t be in a very good mood to begin with. Peril could understand that it would be easier for Clay and his friends if she stayed out of the way, so that Ruby’s visit would go as smoothly as possible.

But WHY WAS IT TAKING SO LONG?

Peril paced to the cave entrance again, peering out into the dimly lit tunnel.

Farther along the tunnel, deeper in the mountain, the faint sounds of splashing and laughter echoed from the underground lake. The SeaWing students had decided the lake was their exclusive clubhouse and were there all the time now. Peril was always careful to avoid them. She avoided all the students as much as she could.

Everyone here was afraid of her, but no one was *careful* of her the way they’d been in the Sky Kingdom. Only the SkyWings knew how to steer a wide path around her. The dragons in Scarlet’s palace had been experts at avoiding Peril; wherever she’d gone, empty space opened up around her.

Here, *she* had to be the cautious one. *She* was responsible for staying out

of *their* way. Even though they were terrified of her, the other students kept forgetting she was there.

But what if she bumped into one of them? What if her tail brushed someone's wing by accident?

How would Clay look at her then?

He said she deserved a second chance … but if she burned one of his students, she knew there wouldn't be a third.

Peril's claws twisted and clenched, thinking of all the dragonets Clay was protecting here. Did he love them more than her? He must — he should — why wouldn't he? They were innocent symbols of the bright future he always talked about. None of them had murdered — her mind shied away from the numbers — a whole lot of dragons.

But none of them had saved his life either! *And* his friends!

Didn't matter. They still hated her, those shining friends who stood between her and Clay like blue and green and gold flames, flaring suspiciously whenever she so much as looked at him.

Down on the sands of Burn's stronghold, after she'd saved him, under the eyes of all the tribes, Clay had said, "maybe Peril is our wings of fire." And for one surreal moment she'd thought, *maybe I am — maybe this makes up for everything I've done. Maybe by saving Clay, I've saved the world.*

Maybe everyone will forgive me now. Maybe everyone will love me now.

But that wasn't what had happened.

After the end of the war, Peril had searched for Queen Scarlet for months, all across the continent. And everywhere she went, dragons fled screaming at the sight of her. Or they fainted. Or they threw spears and rocks at her, along with anything else sharp or pointy or heavy that they could get their talons on. Once she'd been walloped in the face by a dead crocodile, flung from the depths of the MudWing swamps.

It was strange to realize that things like that could hurt more on the inside of your scales than the outside.

It was strange to realize that a dragon who *couldn't* be hurt on the outside could have so many ragged holes on the inside.

There! Talons thumping on stone! The rough slither of a tail! Was it him?

Peril nearly leaped into the corridor — and came within a wing flicker of colliding with a dragon who definitely wasn't Clay.

The dark green SeaWing dragonet didn’t scream or faint or stagger back in terror. He simply froze, slamming his eyes closed as though danger would obligingly disappear the moment he couldn’t see it anymore.

“What are you *doing*?” Peril yelped, jumping away from him.

“Um,” he said in a low, rumbly voice. “Walking? In the halls? Back to my cave?” He risked opening one eye to peer at her.

“Well, that was VERY STUPID of you!” she snapped.

He thought about that for a moment, then opened both eyes and regarded her peaceably. “Oh,” he said. “Sorry.”

What a peculiar dragon. He seemed to have no fire about him at all. That wasn’t a SeaWing thing; Tsunami was a fireball that blazed up and down and sideways at everything that made her mad (which was most things). And her sister, the little SeaWing princess, at least from a distance seemed to be a shower of bright orange sparks on the inside.

This SeaWing, on the other talon, was a puddle. A fireless puddle, blobbing quietly into the rocks in front of her, not even trying to get away.

“You’re Peril, aren’t you?” he said. “Queen Scarlet’s …” He trailed off, perhaps realizing there was no good way to end that sentence. *Champion? Weapon? Notorious death monster?*

“Yes,” she hissed. “I’m Queen Scarlet’s notorious death monster.”

He made an odd hiccupping noise and ducked his head. “Ah, OK. I’ll just … go, then.”

What would Clay want her to do in this situation? *Maybe you’ll make some friends here,* he’d said, in that oblivious magical way he had of thinking that any other dragons in the world might have open hearts like his.

“Who are you?” she asked. *Hmmm. That came out more menacing than it sounded in my head.* “I mean, who *are* you?” she tried, adding a Sunnyish cheerful lilt to her voice. *Now I sound manic.* “I’m not being creepy,” she added hastily. “I’m not, like, putting you on a murder list or anything. I don’t have a murder list! Not a to-be-murdered list, I mean. Wait, no — to be clear, I have no kind of murder list at all. Definitely out of the murdering business, me. Maybe I should stop saying the word murder.”

“That would be great,” the SeaWing said. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

“I just did what I was told,” she said in a rush. She couldn’t remember another dragon standing still long enough to hear her say that, not since Ruby

had thrown her out of the Sky Palace. “I was doing what my queen told me to do. Isn’t that what everyone does? I can’t help what I’m like — and what she made me do. Can I?”

Maybe it was that he didn’t look scared. He didn’t look *thrilled* to be having this conversation, but he hadn’t run screaming yet.

His green-eyed gaze traveled thoughtfully along her smoking scales, shifted for a moment to his own talons, and then dropped to the ground. “I guess,” he said. “Turtle.”

Peril puzzled over this for a moment. Was it some kind of SeaWing code? Was he calling her a turtle? Was that a good or a bad thing?

“Moose,” she tried out, just to see what would happen.

He squinted at her. “Uh … I mean, my name is Turtle.”

“Oh!” she said. “Right. Hello. Thank you for not screaming or fainting or throwing a crocodile at me.”

“I thought about it,” he said. “I mean, not the crocodile. Definitely not in the reptile-throwing business, me.”

Now it was her turn to narrow her eyes at him. Was he making fun of her?

“Ha ha?” he tried. “Friendly joke? Are those allowed?”

“Why aren’t you scared of me?” she asked.

“I *am*,” he said. “I just … you’re not the only dragon I know with dangerous powers.”

“Really?” she said. What did that mean? Who was he talking about?

But before he could answer, a roar billowed down through the corridors, like a rolling smoke cloud.

Turtle flared his wings, his green eyes wide. “What was that?”

“Probably Queen Ruby,” Peril said. Was Ruby yelling at Clay? Was Clay all right? Did he need her to come protect him? She glanced back at the row of fire globes leading uphill to the school. “Maybe they just told her that I’m here.”

“Want to go find out?” Turtle asked.

Peril frowned at him. “So I can get roared at face-to-face? That *does* sound more fun.”

“I don’t mean go say *hi*,” Turtle protested. “I mean, *I’m* going to eavesdrop to see what’s happening, so do you want to come?”

Peril curled her wings in, severely tempted. “Oh, no, I shouldn’t. Clay

would be upset with me. He told me to wait here."

"He doesn't have to know," Turtle said with a shrug. "That's kind of the point of being stealthy. And if he doesn't catch you, then you're not doing anything wrong, are you?"

That sounded true. That sounded very true! Really, Clay just wanted her to stay out of Ruby's way. So if she didn't let Ruby see her that was basically the same thing, right? After all, he didn't *specifically* say "you must hide in a cave for hours like an obedient snail," after all.

Stop for a moment. Think this through.

On the one talon, she was still pretty sure Clay wouldn't approve of this plan. On the other talon, it sounded a LOT more appealing than sitting in a cave waiting to be released. On the third talon, why was this strange SeaWing offering to hang out with her? Did he have an agenda? Was it because if they got caught, she was sure to get in a lot more trouble than he did?

Then again, on the fourth talon, shouldn't she say yes to the first friendly dragon she'd met at this school? Clay *did* want her to make friends. So in a way she *was* doing something he would approve of. Right?

Unless Clay secretly thought she was too dangerous for anyone to be friends with. He might think that. She kind of was. Her only friend before Clay had been killed by Queen Scarlet for telling Peril too much.

Well, then, maybe she needed more friends so that some of them could be expendable. If anything happened to Clay right now, it would be the END OF ALL THINGS. She would literally burn down the world. She couldn't even think about it, or else the tunnel would soon be full of rage smoke.

But if she had Clay *and* Turtle as friends, and then Turtle got himself killed by Queen Scarlet or accidentally set on fire, well, then she'd survive OK, because she'd still have Clay.

It occurred to her that this was a rather morbid train of thought to be having about a new friend.

"Yes," she said decisively, making him jump. "Let's go. You walk in front, so I don't whack you with my tail by accident. But don't move too slowly, or I might accidentally step on you." She ducked into the cave again to let him by safely.

Turtle had an "I am now sensing this was a terrible idea" expression on his face, but he took the lead without arguing and managed to walk fast

enough that Peril wasn’t annoyed.

The roar echoed from above again.

Together — more or less — Turtle and Peril headed straight for it.

BOOK ONE
THE DRAGONET PROPHECY

BOOK TWO
THE LOST HEIR

BOOK THREE
THE HIDDEN KINGDOM

BOOK FOUR
THE DARK SECRET

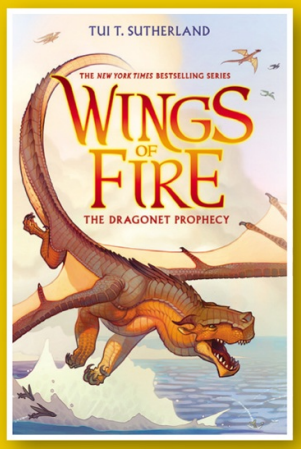
BOOK FIVE
THE BRIGHTEST NIGHT

BOOK SIX
MOON RISING

BOOK SEVEN
WINTER TURNING

BOOK EIGHT
ESCAPING PERIL

An epic series takes flight!



Read them all!

SCHOLASTIC

wingsoffire.scholastic.com

Available in print and eBook editions

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

WINGS7

SPIRIT ANIMALS

Discover Your Spirit Animal!

Read the Books. Play the Game.

SCHOLASTIC

scholastic.com/SpiritAnimals

SCHOLASTIC, SPIRIT ANIMALS, AND ASSOCIATED LOGOS ARE TRADEMARKS AND OR REGISTERED TRADEMARKS OF SCHOLASTIC INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Text copyright © 2015 by Tui T. Sutherland
Border design © 2015 by Mike Schley
Illustrations © 2015 by Joy Ang

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereafter invented, without the express written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First edition, October 2015

e-ISBN 978-0-545-85540-2